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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an innovative educational program called Project Breakthru, which supports the vision of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Aligned with the inclusive philosophy of special education services, this program aims at preventing academic and behavioral problems in children by means of restructuring school resources and fostering collaboration among school personnel. It redefines all service roles within schools, including that of the school psychologist. It links assessment with instruction, establishes collaboration among teachers and support staff, and maximizes school resources. Project Breakthru has been successfully implemented in the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD). Its positive outcomes have led to a marked increase in the number of schools in TUSD that are working within this model. (Contains 9 references). (MKA)

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Running head: PROJECT BREAKTHRU

# Project Breakthru: Precursor of the Spirit for IDEA '97

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Abstract

An innovative educational program called Project Breakthru was described. Aligned with an "inclusive" philosophy of special education services, this program aims at preventing academic and behavioral problems in children by means of restructuring school resources and fostering collaboration among school personnel. Project Breakthru has been successfully implemented in the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD). Its positive outcomes have led to a marked increase in the number of schools in TUSD that are working within this model.

With the introduction of new priorities for Special Education programs set by the recent amendments to IDEA, the timing is most opportune to highlight research-based educational programs that support IDEA's new vision. One such program is Project Breakthru, a preventive educational endeavor of the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD). Established six years ago, Project Breakthru aims at improving the delivery of services to all students in TUSD in the manner and spirit of IDEA's new stipulations.

TUSD's motivation for adopting Project Breakthru stemmed from the district's changing demographics. As is the case with many large urban school systems, TUSD has in recent years experienced rapid growth in its student population, while funding has not kept up with demand. Within this setting, only a small percentage of students have had access to individualized and specialized educational opportunities.

Direct services of this type are usually obtained through Special Education programs that have as their hallmark the traditional evaluation process that results in the identification of student placement options. The benefits of this identification process have been questioned recently by researchers and educators alike (Figueroa & Valdez, 1994; Hilliard, 1991). As has been well established, this selection process has often led to an over-identification of students as handicapped, especially a disproportionate representation across ethnic groups (Rogers, 1998). More importantly, it is felt, that this approach may lead schools to fail to identify critical student needs and the remedies for meeting needs.

Project Breakthru avoids the pitfalls of the traditional special education identification process. Instead, the Project relies on ongoing assessment and early identification of learning and/or behavioral problems to enable schools to meet the needs of students. Furthermore, Breakthru represents a collaborative effort between general and exceptional education personnel seeking to advance student academic, linguistic, and social competencies. Furthermore, Project Breakthru incorporates methodologies that have proven reliable in effective schools and school restructuring research. These methods include family participation, ongoing monitoring of student progress, instructional improvement as a school priority, high academic engagement and good classroom management (Davis & Thomas, 1989).

Project Breakthru challenges its participants to redefine all service roles within schools, including that of the school psychologist. The role of the school psychologist within this model becomes that of a generalist. The school psychologist's essential role is as a collaborative team member who supplies creative leadership in program development, assessment, direct intervention, counseling, and consultative services. Parents are supported through a variety of these services as well as encouraged to participate in direct instruction and mentorship of all students involved in the program.

Although innovation is encouraged, the project is grounded in four basic goals:

- to improve student achievement
- to improve student behavior
- to provide prompt access to services for students in need of individualized assistance

- to increase the number of students receiving support services while reducing the number of Special Education evaluations needed

Breakthru has experienced much success. It has grown from its involvement at two school sites in 1992 to nineteen locations during the 1998-1999 school year. Its continued expansion appears to be directly connected to its demonstrated effectiveness in meeting the aforementioned goals.

Linking Assessment with Instruction

Project Breakthru de-emphasizes the use of norm referenced testing and promotes curriculum-based assessment as the methodology that is the least ethnic and gender biased, yet sensitive to limited English proficiency and special needs students. The process of data collection within the project is referred to as "probing". In general, the areas of student performance which are probed are those which follow the content of the mainstream curriculum.

Within Breakthru, the goal of assessment is to collect information on student performance which can be used to *guide daily instruction* and *measure student learning over time*. At the beginning of each school year, teachers and support staff collect baseline data on student achievement in reading, written expression, and math. Similar to the "Curriculum-Based Measurement" model advanced by Deno (1985), assessment information is used to help determine *where in the curriculum the student should begin working* and *how students could be grouped in situations where short-term*

*homogeneous groupings are desirable*. Reading probes are generally the easiest to complete. Often they begin with students reading passages orally, which are written at varied grade levels, with the intent of counting words correctly read during measured periods of time. Writing usually takes the form of having the students write a short essay, e.g., "personal narrative". Math assessments can be broad, covering a wide range of the year's curriculum, or may more narrowly reflect the specific aspects of the curriculum the teachers wish to stress during the following weeks. Repeated administrations of the same or similar probes are then used to document student learning.

In situations where CBM data show a lack of progress, students receive more individualized assessments. These assessments focus on exploring the students' *performance* and *error patterns* on tasks. Similar to the "Curriculum-Based Evaluation" model advanced by Howell (1986) and the model of Macht (1998), tasks are broken down into more discrete components and student performance is examined in terms of error patterns. These error patterns are analyzed and hypotheses are formed relating to intervention strategies which may be effective in enhancing school success with respect to the targeted area. A plan is then developed to assist the student. Assessment is repeated to ensure the student is benefitting by the treatment. When benefit is not noted by subsequent probing, treatment reliability is assessed to determine whether the plan as intended has been implemented. If an implemented plan is determined to be ineffective, then student performance is again analyzed against the new data and the plan is revised.

Establishing Collaboration Among Teachers and Support Staff

Through collaboration, classroom and resource teachers, school psychologists, school social workers, counselors, diagnosticians, speech and language specialists, and other itinerant specialists can share valuable student information, as well as, effective teaching strategies for students. Strategies developed for one student are often generalized to fulfill the needs of other students. An indirect effect of collaboration is the exchange, strengthening, and refinement of professional skills. Steps in the collaborative process include:

- analysis of observational/assessment data
- development of curricular goals and plans for individual and group instruction
- development of instructional strategies for meeting the needs of individual students
- provision of professional growth opportunities for all personnel
- assessment and modification of the school's collaborative team approach

An effective collaborative process produces a staff that supports an inclusive philosophy by working together in an integrated manner for the benefit of all students.

An example of staff collaboration can be clearly seen in a recent case of school refusal, parent anxiety, and cultural differences. In this particular situation, a student from Central America entered kindergarten for her first day of school. At the time, she exhibited difficulties separating from her parents. The behavioral issues were soon

exacerbated by the parents' severe anxiety exhibited while separating from their child. Student behavioral difficulties included tantruming. The student's tantrums accelerated into physical aggression toward peers and the classroom teacher. This aggression included daily occurrences of raging lasting from 30 to 45 minutes. Significant destruction of property and classroom disruption ensued.

Initially the classroom teacher requested a meeting of her collaborative team. This included the classroom teacher, school psychology intern, the special education resource teacher, and principal. The process of reviewing background information and identifying target objectives was completed during the initial half hour meeting. The teacher provided sufficient observational data to form hypotheses regarding initial intervention procedures. Strategy development and follow-up assessment procedures were operationalized. Additionally, specific communication patterns between the school and home were put into place, along with support systems for the mainstream teacher.

The goals identified by the collaborative team included increasing the student's tolerance of separation from the parents. This was measured as an increase in voluntary student participation in daily classroom activities. Also prioritized was the goal of improving the quality of coping mechanisms used by the student when under stress. Successful coping was to be seen in her use of appropriate self-control and social behavior when separating from her parents. Taken together the identified goals were to result in a rapid decrease of severe aggressive, destructive, and disruptive behaviors. It was hoped that the child would no longer evidence: hitting and kicking of

other students and the teacher; throwing of chairs; and throwing of educational materials.

The plan developed by the collaborative team included: a) establishing an ongoing relationship between the parents and teacher facilitated by a bilingual translator; and b) identification of procedures judged likely to be effective in changing the student's level of school refusal behaviors. These procedures included:

1) structuring the separation of the student and parent at the beginning of the school day
2) limiting parental involvement during daily school activities
3) educating the parent on the probable causes and contributing factors relating to their child's behavior and helping the parent understand the basis for the treatment plan suggested
4) enlisting the parents participation in the plan's implementation by having them reinforce successful approximations of the goals outlined in the treatment plan

The results of the team's commitment to the plan were positive. Each participant assumed specific responsibilities in the plan. These included:

- School Psychology Intern - responsible for addressing family concerns and explaining the program and its procedures, providing ongoing observational data and feedback to the classroom teacher.
- Classroom Teacher - worked with the student implementing specific daily

strategies, maintained anecdotal notes, and adjusted programmatic expectations.

- School Principal - provided support and feedback to all participating team members regarding the evolution of the plan. She also promoted a school climate conducive to successful execution of the plan.
- Resource Teacher - acted as the collaborative informational coordinator, set up planning sessions, and maintained planning notes.

The plan was adjusted during the ongoing sessions conducted by the team. Team contacts faded in frequency as the need dictated. At the end of two weeks, aggressive behavior had been extinguished. During the beginning of the second semester, parents were progressively reinvolved in school activities with no significant student distress noted. In addition to these outcomes, parents reported improved general social behavior by the child at home and in the community.

A second example of the application of Breakthru procedures can be seen in the case of a developmentally disabled student who had attended a self-contained class, but was placed in a full inclusion classroom upon the parent's request.

The collaborative team initially convened prior to this student's arrival for the school year. The parent provided extensive background information to the team and collaborated with the team to determine priority objectives for the student. Classroom observations were made by the school psychologist while the student was in the self-contained classroom at the sending school. These observations provided additional

data helpful in formulating the initial strategies and objectives. Areas targeted for intervention were:

- improving expressive communication skills
- increasing self-control (staying in assigned classroom and assigned area)
- increasing on-task behavior
- improving pre-academic and motor skills (coloring, cutting, and riding a tricycle)

The plan initially instituted included:

- encouraging peer modeling for social, self-control, and communication skills by pairing the student with peers who assumed a relationship with the child
- contingent access to the student's favorite toys upon compliance with teacher directions to go to or remain in a designated area
- the use of time out procedures when the student attempted accessing choice materials or activities not offered by the teacher
- fading of staff usage of physical controls (holding, lifting, and guiding), but instead waiting for the child to respond to verbal cuing and the interventions described above

The ongoing team collaboration for this child continued throughout the school year with consistent planning sessions designed to adjust objectives and strategies.

Anecdotal information collected by the classroom teacher was adapted by the school psychology intern into a time line/learning curve used to predict the effectiveness of continued inclusive services for the student. The classroom and resource teachers worked in conjunction with each other during daily center time to provide intensive help to this student in small group instruction in the mainstream environment. Video taped time samples of the student's behavior supported the data collected indicating strong improvements in all areas targeted.

Maximizing School Resources

The reorientation of priorities structured through this project encourages flexible staff involvement and emphasizes the group process. This approach de-emphasizes the need for specialization. Staff members are able to participate in a climate designed to minimize unnecessary paperwork, normative testing; records, and meetings. Time is reallocated for planning for individual and group needs. Funding is similarly re-prioritized. Resources are shifted to promote parent and mentorship involvement with students. This streamlining of time and materials provides a focus on the mainstream teacher and core curriculum. This substantially reduces the use of limited resources on determining student eligibility for services and redirects available resources to efforts that support student services.

The Expanded Role of the School Psychologist

As was seen in the two case studies described earlier, the school psychologist is

given the opportunity to respond to the critical needs of students, staff, and parents by acting in the role of a generalist. The behaviors needed in this capacity include:

- ability to use all specific components of functional assessment/analysis
- familiarity with a broad array of academic, self-control, and social training strategies
- ability to generate support for a collaborative philosophy in traditional school systems
- motivation to change priorities for the school psychologist job description and expend the energy needed to shift roles

Outcomes

The process created did not mandate change or specific actions resulting in change, but rather provided each school with the power to be as innovative and effective as its culture demanded. Outcomes for each school varied with its level of commitment to the Project's goals and resources available within the school. Across Breakthru schools, Special Education referral and placement levels have decreased while the number of students receiving individualized assessments, academic and behavior supports, and parent involvement has increased. As an example of the impact on Special Education referral and services provided to students, the data from the first year (92'-93') of the project is illustrative. The project began with two schools. The larger of the two schools participated school-wide while the smaller school began with kindergarten and first grades. As fully participating, the larger school's data is easier to interpret. The demographics of the school included a total population of

about 750 students. Nearly 150 of the students were enrolled in self-contained classes for students identified as gifted and talented and were bussed to the school. The remaining students were neighborhood children. The school had many characteristics of an urban setting including: single parent families; a very high proportion of students receiving reduced or free school lunches; and a high level of transience. The year prior to the implementation of Breakthru, the Special Education Team evaluated 124 students for new or continuing (3-year reevaluations) Special Education services. At the beginning of the 92'-93' school year, 66 students were placed on the Special Education role for "resource level" services. These placements included students identified Specific Learning Disabilities, Emotional Disabilities, Other Health Impaired, Orthopedically Impaired, and Mildly Mentally Retarded. The Special Education referral rate dropped to 24 (both initial and 3-year reevaluations) in the first year. The number of students served by the "resource" teachers increased from the 66 students who were placed at the beginning of the year to a total of 196 by years end. Probing data for the students receiving Breakthru assistance showed substantial gains in students' present performance levels as measured against the mainstream curriculum. In addition to the 196 students receiving academic support by the resource teachers, other students received assistance by the speech and language therapist, school social worker, and school psychologist.

In the years that have followed, most of the Breakthru schools have experienced similar benefits. All schools have seen their referral levels drop substantially and all schools have seen an increase in the number of students receiving assistance.

Schools have seen decreases in the number of students suspended and an increase in the number of students able to participate in state mandated group testing. Many students formally placed in self-contained settings were able to be included in regular classrooms, often before matriculating to middle school. Additionally, each classroom teacher had the opportunity for collaborative support by Special Education staff as well as one another.

School personnel, particularly Special Education resource teachers, report changes in their professional activities as well as increases in the amount of their workload. Irregardless, a large majority of personnel commit to Breakthru participation during the initial formulation of the Project at their site. In each school, this commitment has been maintained by almost all of the support personnel including Special Education resource teachers. Very few resource teachers have elected to leave the project after its first year of implementation, which is generally perceived to be the most difficult year for each site. Surveys of staff have generally shown mixed levels of satisfaction with the Project, but each school's faculty has clearly chosen to stay with Breakthru rather than return to the traditional model employed in the school prior to the Project's implementation. The primary criticism of staff is that the Project has unrealistically high expectations for students and those who are responsible for their education. Many have expressed their concerns that system resources are too scarce to meet the needs of every student. Other comments by support staff indicate improved job satisfaction due to less paperwork, increased time with students, improved building climate, improved relationships with parents, and generally higher student

achievement. Some personnel tend to align with the expectations of the teachers' bargaining unit regarding teacher caseload responsibilities, while most personnel appear motivated by the heightened expectations made on staff and the opportunities for collaborative relationships with fellow professionals.

Parent participation in Breakthru schools has improved in most schools when measured by the number of parent meetings. In all Breakthru schools, parents have found new partners in the teachers and support staff who work with their children. The sometimes adversarial relationships which can evolve from a system which focuses on eligibility have been replaced by collaboration and problem solving where parents and teachers no longer need to inflate or dwell on their child's difficulties in order to get specialized help for their children.

Collaboration has resulted in improved delivery of direct services to students, increased interaction among staff, expanded skills among classroom teachers and support staff, and a greater awareness of each school's mission. By working together, schools and families have decreased the time it takes to identify individual needs and increased the amount of support provided students. These outcomes have helped create schools where inclusive practices are a regular occurrence and school-family partnerships are common place.

Generation of New Resources

Project Breakthru has developed an ongoing relationship with The University of Arizona School Psychology Program by making internship experiences available to

students who seek future positions in districts employing progressive service delivery models. Additionally, several schools in the project have also incorporated curricular support from such programs as Success for All (Slavin, Madden, & Wasik 1996) and the Cognitive Math Program (Jones, 1996).

Project Breakthru was created through an ongoing collaborative effort of school principals, Special Education Administration, and school psychologists to meet the ever changing needs of District schools. This process was facilitated through the leadership of Dr. Betsy Bounds, TUSD Executive Director for Exceptional Education. Dr. Bounds' involvement included bringing relevant professional groups together, supporting creative solutions, offering flexibility through changing roles, and providing budgetary support. Additionally, Joel Macht, Ph.D., school psychologist for TUSD, provided the creative vision for the development of the Project's central features, including the expanded roles of the school psychologist and other support staff. Through Dr. Macht's leadership, a new model for creating and supporting change in schools emerged.

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